



a faith vision of reality

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circular letter 26

(sixth and final in a series)

“Most noble Queen, gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse...” (2LAg, 20)¹

“The journey of the first Capuchins to the periphery was also a journey...to acquire a broader vision of reality, contemplated from the vantage point of God and the poor” (VII PCO, 31)

To all the sisters and brothers of the Order

Dear sisters and brothers,

1.1 Our triune, relational God who bends low to embrace us and all of creation in humble, self-giving love is the foundation of our poverty and minority. Following Francis, we are led to contemplate the self-emptying Christ disclosed to us in the poor (see VII PCO, Proposals 2 and 3). Following Francis, we are led to reach out to those whom the Church would otherwise not reach or touch. The journey to the periphery of society is more than a sociological transformation. The effort to reach those on the periphery of the Church is more than a new pastoral plan. The poor and the alienated expect and require of us a **new vision of faith**.

1.2 The first chapter of Mark's Gospel gives a certain prominence to the *deserted place* in the mission of Jesus. The deserted place is a symbol of Jesus' identification with, and ministry to those who are excluded: “A leper came to him begging him, and kneeling he said to him, ‘If you choose, you can make me clean’” (Mk 1:40). Why does Mark stress the act of kneeling? Certainly, it was a gesture of petition. The text states that the leper was “begging him.” However, the leper also knelt to ensure that his shadow would not contaminate Jesus. It was the ultimate and cruel sign of the leper's total exclusion from society: “The person who has

the leprous disease shall wear torn clothes and let the hair of his head be disheveled; and he shall cover his upper lip and cry out, ‘Unclean, unclean!’ ...He shall live alone; his dwelling shall be outside the camp” (see Lev 13:45-46). Mark captures the compassion of the encounter: “Moved with pity, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him [the leper], and said to him, ‘I do choose. Be made clean’” (Mk 1:41). In the act of making the leper clean, Jesus incurred ritual uncleanness. To move the leper “inside the camp,” restoring him to society and to his family, Jesus himself moves “outside the camp,” and “could no longer go into a town openly, but stayed in deserted places” (Mk 1:45).

During the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order, the periphery – being “outside the camp” – also took on a certain prominence as a sign of our identification with the poor and as a constant challenge to our ministry: Francis' “encounter with this human being [i.e., the leper], abandoned and excluded by the society and system of his day, made Francis ‘leave the world’ and change his social status and residence, moving out from the center to the periphery of Rivo Torto and Our Lady of the Angels” (VII PCO, 3). The same proposal challenges the Order “to make a ‘significant’ shift towards the periphery of today's society, where we wish to pitch our tents among the lowly ones of today, as Jesus, Francis and the first Capuchins did in their day.” This is an essential component of our minority.

¹ Armstrong OFM Cap, Regis J. (ed. and tr). *The Lady. Clare of Assisi: Early Documents*. New York: New City Press, 2006, p. 49.

1.3 The first chapter of Mark's Gospel assigns importance to still other dimensions

CHALLENGES TO EVANGELIZATION

of deserted places. Jesus went to the desert to be baptized by John the Baptist and to receive his mission from the Father (see Mk 1:9-11). Jesus went to the desert to be tempted and to give direction to his vocation by rejecting a mission founded on power which dominates and wealth (Mk 1:12-13). Jesus returned to the desert to find renewal and strength. Describing a typical day in the life of Jesus during his ministry, Mark writes: "In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went to a deserted place, and there he prayed" (Mk 1:35).

This dimension of the desert – the periphery – found strong resonance at the Seventh Plenary Council of the Order:

The journey of the first Capuchins to the periphery was also a journey to contemplation and silence open to the world. ...The hermitage, which for the first Capuchins was always on the edges of the town, is not a place in which to avert one's gaze, but to acquire a **broader vision of reality**, contemplated from the vantage point of God and the poor. VII PCO, 31

Just as in the life of St. Francis there was a reciprocal relationship between his experience of the leper and his experience of the Crucified One, so among the early Capuchins there was a reciprocal relationship between the hermitage and the victims of the plague, between contemplation and the poor. St. Clare makes this even more evident. Writing to Blessed Agnes of Prague she says: "Most noble Queen, gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse,..." (2LAg, 20). For Clare, the desire to imitate is not distinct from gazing, considering, or contemplating, as if it were a **consequence** of prayer. Rather, Clare sees imitating action as an essential dimension of her four-part prayer process. For Clare, prayer is never sterile. Prayer that does not result in "to imitate", is not prayer! Therefore, the hermitage – the symbol *par excellence* of Capuchin contemplation – "is not a place in which to avert one's gaze, but to **acquire** a broader vision of reality." To be a truly contemplative vision of reality, it demands **a vision of faith expressed in commitment to action!** A recovery of this dimension of our charism is necessary if the Order is to participate fully in the new evangelization of our world.

2.1 "Secularization" was the term originally applied to a movement across Europe in the 19th Century whereby ecclesiastical properties were seized and "secularized," i.e., converted to non-religious use, most often by the state. Many of the friaries belonging to our European provinces were confiscated during that period. In the 20th Century, the term broadened to indicate the exclusion of religion, especially organized religion, from all spheres of political and social influence. Along with the outright abandonment of religion, secularism gave rise to "secular religions" such as New Age. It also gave strong impetus to non-organized evangelical religions and to sects which champion self-realization. The focus of secularism purports to be "liberation" understood as the autonomy of the human person. Rather than liberation and wholeness, however, this autonomy leads to an individualism and alienation of the human person marked by isolation and broken relationships. The emphasis upon the individual sows the seeds of suspicion not only on the structures of religion, but on all human structures which are perceived as impediments to individual autonomy. This secular pursuit of total autonomy of the individual leads not to freedom but to alienation and isolation (see VII PCO, 4).

2.2 Secularism places full trust in its technologies as the principal instruments of human liberation. Technologies – products of our own genius – contain within themselves all that is necessary to realize full human autonomy. God is not necessary. We are "omnipotent!" Religion is relegated to the realm of personal myth. This has given rise to a second important phenomenon peculiar to western societies, but affecting the entire world, namely, the post-Christian era wherein our basic human values such as liberty, respect for the individual, compassion for the downtrodden, peace and justice are cut loose from their Christian, biblical and religious foundations. This world seeks a new humanism with no reference to God. Secularization and post-Christianity provoke strong reactions, including fundamentalism, wherein particular religious beliefs are rendered absolute and defended even with violence.

An autonomous world with no need of God

The post-christian world

2.3 Political upheaval and global economic change continue to produce tens of millions of political and economic refugees. The unemployed and the under-employed are a permanent feature of the global economy. The periphery of every major city in the world is the abode of tens of thousands and, at times, millions of persons who form a permanent underclass, devoid of any reasonable hope of escaping their economic and social condition. Excluded from the benefits of the global economy, they experience alienation from family and cultural roots. They become strangers in their own land or unwelcome guests elsewhere.

often ruptures the ties of solidarity and loyalty which have bound workers and employers for lifetimes. It also weakens labor movements. Workers in all societies live the anxiety and insecurity of isolation from fellow workers and members of society. The fallout of secularism and the global economy is evidenced in a severe dislocation of human relationships, the fundamental component of what it means to image and mirror our triune God. This results in an exponential rise of insecurity and violence.

2.5 This rapid overview of some of the negative realities of the world in which we live does not pretend to paint a full picture.



2.4 In secularism, the economy ultimately guarantees its goal, namely, full human autonomy. But therein is revealed an inherent contradiction. Secularism is founded on an economy of greed which embraces unemployment and under-employment as a permanent feature, thus necessitating the subordination of millions of human beings. Secularism cannot deliver its most cherished goal! Furthermore, secularism's denial of the relevance of God gives rise to a violent fundamentalist revolt among the millions of poor who cling to God as their sole hope in a world of inequality. The recent Justice, Peace and Ecology Assembly in Porto Alegre cited a statistic revealing that the 500 richest persons on our planet own and control resources equal to those available to 416 million of the poorest! Hyper-consumerism, another feature of the globalized economy, serves to increase the anger and frustration of these countless millions of disadvantaged persons who live in the excluded periphery. Living side-by-side with an economy of abundance, and bombarded by the illusions of modern advertising, they are denied participation. While the globalization of the economy brings benefits to many, it

It simply serves to highlight some of the challenges facing a brotherhood committed to the proclamation of the saving Word of God. At the same time, the complexities of this world make us realize that the challenge of the new evangelization demands much more than simply a new plan of action, a new pastoral plan. The new evangelization is the proclamation of a new Christian humanism of redeemed relationships flowing from a triune God who bends low to embrace us in humble, compassionate love. The re-evangelization of our world will not result from a grand strategy of our Order, our bishops or even Pope Benedict XVI. Just as the Gospel first entered Europe through the intervention of the Holy Spirit (see Acts 16:13-16), so the Holy Spirit is already active in our secularized, post-Christian world of exclusion and violence, opening hearts to new relationships based on the freshness of the Gospel.

The new movement of the Spirit is recognized by a penitent, humble, faith-filled attitude of hopeful expectation. We are also struck by the testimony of Pope John Paul II:

For over half a century, every day, ...my

eyes have gazed in recollection upon the host and the chalice, where time and space in some way “merge” and the drama of Golgatha is re-presented in a living way, thus revealing its mysterious “contemporaneity.” Each day my faith has been able to recognize in the consecrated bread and wine the divine Wayfarer who joined the two disciples on the road to Emmaus and opened their eyes to the light and their hearts to new hope (see Lk 24:13-35).
 Pope John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 59

In this context, the urgent plea of the Seventh Plenary Council resounds: “It is essential to develop an ability to view things contemplatively, especially through the community exercise of silent prayer” (Proposal 31). The Capuchin hermitage tradition is the tradition of personal prayer and meditation. We cannot build spiritually insightful fraternities upon brothers who are spiritually superficial! Imagine the spiritual power which would be generated and unleashed if each one of us individually would commit ourselves to our tradition of personal prayer. Our personal relationship with God gives substance to our communal prayer, depth to our fraternal relationships, and direction to our mission. Since personal prayer was the focus of Circular Letter 18, here I will dwell on the communal, fraternal dimension of this challenge.

A HUMBLE GOD BOWING LOW TO EMBRACE US

3.1 “The turning of the Father toward the Son is the Father’s humility. Humility is not a quality of God, it is the essence of God as love.”² According to St. Bonaventure, the one and same embrace of the Father which reaches out to the Son, reaches out to us as well. Just as Jesus is the Word of the Father, we are each “little words” of the Father. Furthermore, God bends low to embrace all of creation in humility. Creation itself is a word of the Father. In the Franciscan view, the Incarnation occurred not because of sin, but because of the overflowing, abundant and humble love of God. In the cross, this humble love reaches out to embrace our humanity even in the depths of sinfulness and

alienation, caught up in the web of violence and betrayed and broken relationships. The cross is the infallible sign planted in history which indicates that no expression of our humanity is alien to or separated from God’s redeeming love. Let us look to Jesus to see what it means to contemplate reality from the vantage point of God.

3.2 In his homily on the Feast of the Annunciation, Pope Benedict pointed out that the Angel Gabriel addressed the Virgin not as “Mary” – the name by which she is identified in our human society –, but by the name by which she is identified by the Father: “favored one” (see Lk 1:28). In the same way, Jesus greets the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s Well not as she was known in Shechem – mistress to five men – but as she was known by the Father, one yearning for the spring of living water. To reach the true yearning of her heart for new and redeemed relationships, Jesus breaks through layers of sexism and ethnic prejudice: “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria” (Jn 4:9)? Jesus overcomes her religious superficiality: “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (Jn 4:24). Jesus confronts the superficiality of her human relationships: “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband;’ ...you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband” (Jn 4:17). His penetrating, contemplative gaze goes to the heart of her longing: “Give me this water,” (Jn 4:15), and purifies that longing for redeemed relationship with God and humanity.

*“Give me this water...”
(Jn 4: 15)*

All of the circumstances point to the humility of the encounter. Jesus waits for the woman. “Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well” (Jn 4:6). Patience with the other is an expression of humility. He chooses to meet her at Jacob’s Well, a place “outside the camp” – outside the town for the woman, but an alien land for a Jew. Yet, it is a place where Jew and Samaritan can dialogue, a place rich in religious tradition for both. Humility does not impose! Jesus initiates the dialogue from a position of vulnerability, making himself dependent upon the woman: “Give me a drink” (Jn 4:7). In the process, Jesus opens the woman to see himself in a new light: “I know that Messiah is coming” (Jn 4:25). Jesus replies: “I am he, the one who is speaking to you” (Jn 4:26).

² Delio, Elia, OSF, *The Humility of God: A Franciscan Perspective*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2005, p. 42.

After the Annunciation event, having been embraced by the humble love of the Father, “Mary set out and went with haste...” to encounter her cousin Elizabeth (see Lk 1:39). In a similar manner, the Samaritan women goes forth from the encounter with Jesus to embrace her townspeople in an entirely new manner, becoming a force for faith and communion. The woman encountered the poor and humble Christ “outside the camp.” Jesus accompanies her back “inside the camp” to encounter her neighbors in a new and deeper way. The penetrating, contemplative gaze of God touches the core of human longing for relationship (after all, we are made in the image of a relational God), and calls forth a newness not deemed possible!

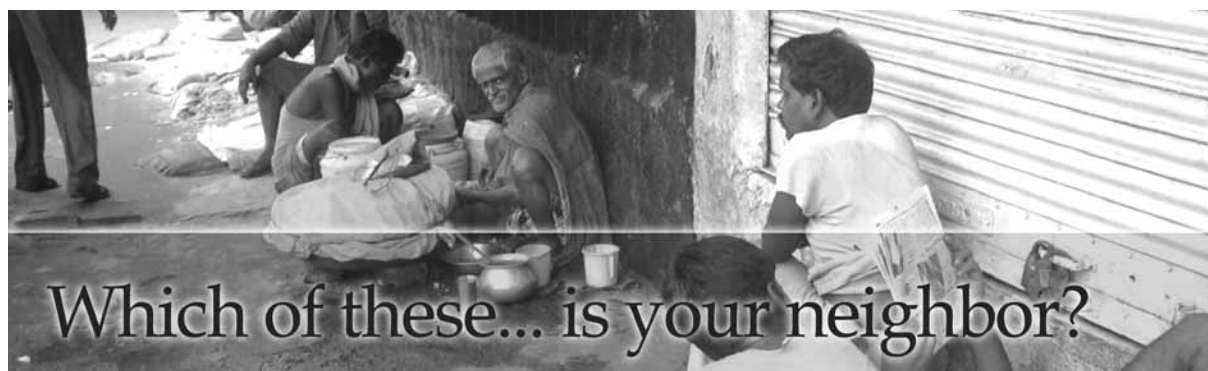
“Which of these... was a neighbor?” (Lk 10: 36)

3.3 “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers” (Lk 10:30). This is the experience of millions of political and economic migrants each year who leave their ancestral villages seeking new life in the city. They never quite arrive. They end up on

mission: “Go and do likewise” (Lk 10:37).

4.1 The example of Jesus speaks to our experience of proclaiming the saving Word of God in a secularized world of religious superficiality, alienation and violence. When we gaze upon our neighbor with the eyes of the Father, we touch the depth of human longing for relationship and love. This requires the spiritual depth which we find in our Franciscan faith tradition. Each chapter of our present Constitutions is introduced in a similar manner with a series of reflections upon Christ, the Church, St. Francis, and our Capuchin tradition leading to conclusions for our life today. The pre-Capitular Commission which will present to the upcoming General Chapter a new working document on the Constitutions, has added still another level, namely, a Trinitarian reflection. We will be led from the Holy Trinity, Jesus, the Church, St. Francis, and our Capuchin tradition to contemplate the reality of our life today. Allow the spiritual profundity of our

Spiritual depth and vision



the periphery of our modern cities, victims of violence and exploitation. The Good Samaritan is more than one who offers a helping hand to his unfortunate neighbor. He takes responsibility for the neighbor: “He... bandaged his wounds... put him on his own animal...and took care of him” (Lk 10:34). Yet, the focus of this parable is not the Good Samaritan, it is the lawyer!

“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Lk 10:25). Jesus challenges the world view of the lawyer whose very religion has closed his heart within the narrow confines of self-interest: “Which of these...was a neighbor...?” (Lk 10:36). Jesus calls forth an unexpected response from the lawyer: “The one who showed him mercy” (Lk 10:37). Mercy and compassion build communion in a world of violence and alienation. Jesus sends him off on this new

Constitutions to pass into our lives! What would happen in the world if every local and provincial chapter, if every pastoral meeting in our ministries, would start with this profound vision of faith? It does not require spiritual depth to recognize and describe the absence of God in our world. Our daily newspapers and the television news proclaim it! It requires spiritual depth to recognize **God’s presence!** Our triune God is a relational God. Where God is present, alienation gives way to solidarity; isolation gives way to sister-brotherhood.

4.2 “Prayer to God, as the breathing of love, has its origin from a movement of the Holy Spirit through which an interior person listens to the voice of God speaking to the heart” (Constitutions, 45.1).

Prayer does not separate us from the world! It involves us in the world on the deepest level of reality. Prayer makes us aware of the pervasive movement of the Holy Spirit in our personal life, in our fraternities and in our world. Therefore, every chapter, every pastoral meeting, every encounter can become a “hermitage” moment – a faith moment – where we consciously seek “to acquire a broader vision of reality, contemplated from the vantage point of God and the poor” (Proposal 31). St. Clare’s words can guide us: “Most noble Queen, gaze, consider, contemplate, desiring to imitate your Spouse...” (2LAg, 20). It was precisely this four-part prayer process which changed Clare and her sisters’ relationship with the people around their cloister. Contemplating the image of the poor and humble Christ in the poor surrounding their monastery, Clare and her sisters insisted on the “privilege of poverty” that excluded the sisters from any domination over tenants and servants who were an essential part of the economy of every other medieval monastery of women. To gaze...to consider...to contemplate... to imitate offers us a pastoral tool, not just an ascetical prayer practice: “The lesser brother is one who contemplates above all a God who humbles himself in the manger, on the cross and in the Eucharist...” (Proposal 31).

*The Eucharist,
a mode of
being...*

5.1 What we gaze upon in mental prayer must be embraced and celebrated in Eucharist. Throughout the working document of the recent Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist, we find repeated references to the problem of establishing a vital link between the *mysterium fidei* and the reality of human life. Most often, this concern is expressed by emphasizing the absence of Eucharistic devotion, poor Sunday attendance, and the dichotomy between faith practice and moral life. The Eucharist forms a community of faith. The bishops of the Church challenge the Christian faithful, and especially the followers of St. Francis, to make our own that which we celebrate. The same working document states: “Eucharist is a mode of being, which passes from Jesus into each Christian, through whose testimony it is meant to spread throughout society and culture” (n. 78).

5.2 We are struck by the simplicity with which Francis looks at the Eucharistic mystery. He links the Eucharistic celebration and the Incarnation: “Behold, each day he

humbles himself as when he came from the royal throne into the virgin’s womb; each day he himself comes to us, appearing humbly; each day he comes down from the bosom of the Father, upon the altar in the hands of a priest” (Adm I, 16-17). Francis constructs an impressive analogy between the descent of Jesus into the womb of the Virgin Mary and his Eucharistic descent onto the altar during Mass.

For Francis, the sacrament of the Eucharist is a fountain of light that permeates the whole of reality so that everything acquires a sacramental dimension. Every event is recognized as having the character of a sign in which God communicates himself and addresses us. On the basis of the sacrament in which the mystery of God is perceived as present in the bread and wine, the full reality of things as they are becomes a sign by which to recognize the mystery of Christ making his appeal for recognition, hospitality and testimony:

As the poor Christ continues his journey of unity among creatures under the humble eucharistic forms of bread and wine (Adm I, 17), so, we, through the waters of baptism, become Christ (see 1Cor 12:12-13, 27) travelling on earth with the divine mission of healing, reconciling, liberating and redeeming (see 1Jn 2:17). VII PCO, 2a

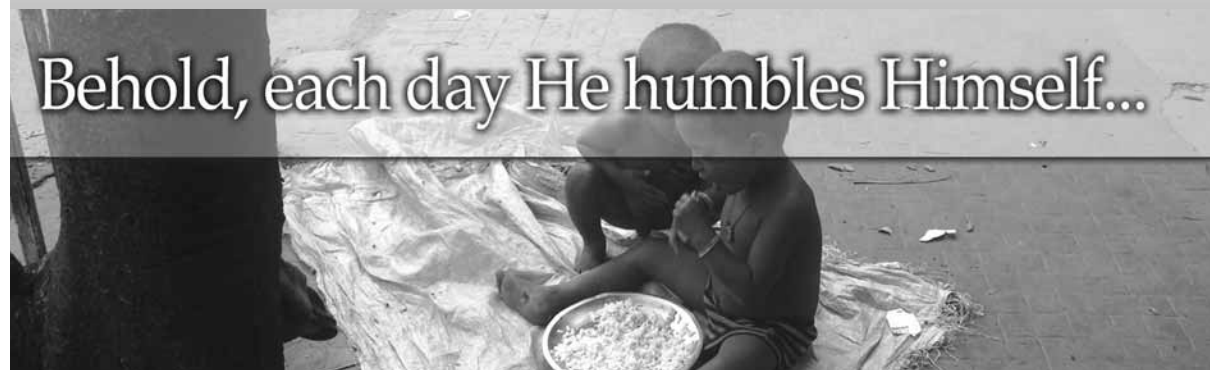
5.3 As fraternities, may Francis help us to rediscover the profound link between the Eucharistic mystery and the circumstances of everyday life, starting from fraternal relationships and broadening out to embrace the whole of creation.

O sublime humility! O humble sublimity! The Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation he hides himself under an ordinary piece of bread! Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before him! LtOrd, 27-28

The Eucharist is for us the restorative place of redeemed relationships, the place where we commune with the triune God – community-in-love –: “Brothers, look at the humility of God, and pour out your hearts before him!” The Eucharist impels us to form fraternal

relationships in the Church, in society and with the whole creation. Work for the promotion of a true sister-brotherhood of peace among people and for the protection of creation encourages us to recognize in the Eucharist the only adequate foundation for our life and action. May the Spirit of God and his holy operation help us each day to stand in awe at the humility of God, who

comes to meet us daily in the sacrament of his body and blood. May the power of the Paraclete make us living members of his body, and may our life be ever more Eucharistic, respecting and welcoming every living creature, joining all creation in its immense chorus of praise to the God who is One and Three, in Christ our Lord and brother.



CONCLUSION

6.1 The First Book of Kings recounts a long, 3-year drought during which no rain, not even dew, fell upon the land of Israel. "Elijah went up to the top of Carmel, there he bowed himself down upon the earth and put his face between his knees" (1 Kings 18:42). The prophet instructs his servant to climb to the highest point, to look out to the sea and to report what he sees. Each time the servant reports: "There is nothing." On the seventh time, he reports: "Look, a little cloud no bigger than a person's hand is rising out of the sea" (1 Kings 18:44). Elijah tells his servant to run and tell the king to depart in haste before the rains impede him! For the prophet, the question was not **whether** the Lord would send rain, but **when** the Lord would send rain! This is the faith which must animate a believing fraternity. Like Elijah on

Mount Carmel, like our early Capuchin brothers in their hermitages, the modern Capuchin fraternity is challenged to look out upon the world with the same eyes of faith, confident that the humble love of God is reaching out to embrace even a world of violence, even a world which arrogantly believes that God has been superceded by its own technologies. May the eyes of our faith recognize the clouds "no bigger than a person's hand" arising from the sea of our humanity which signal the advent of humble love in the world.

Fraternally,

General Minister
Br. John Corriveau, OFM Cap

30 April 2006
Third Sunday of Easter

